

## E(race)ing Mexican Americans: Why Denying Racial Indigeneity Constitutes White Supremacy in Family Science

Azucena Verdín, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Child Development, Texas Woman's University, [averdin@twu.edu](mailto:averdin@twu.edu)

### In Brief

- Mexican American's racial indigeneity has been erased by double-colonization and the construction of the Mexican Other by Anglo settler-colonists.
- Reducing Mexicanness to an ethnicity renders anti-mestiza/o racism invisible and reproduces White supremacy.
- Critical mestizaje can deepen Mexican Americans' awareness of Indigenous ancestry, a repudiation of the deficit narrative of Mexican-as-perpetual-invader.

In her podcast, *Anything for Selena*, journalist María García (2021) described seeing Tejano superstar Selena Quintanilla's racially Indigenous phenotype on Spanish-language television in the 1990s. At 9 years old, García recognized Selena's brown body violated an implicit racial hierarchy rooted in colonization and Indigenous and African enslavement across North America (Garza, 2014; Reséndez, 2016). That Selena "looked more Mexican" than her Mexican-born co-stars implied an onto-epistemological link between "looking" Mexican and indigeneity, a link erased within a Black-White discourse that detribalizes Mexican-origin people when subsumed under the pan-ethnic terms Hispanic/Latinx (Gastelum et al., 2020; Sosa-Provencio, 2019). For the 59% of non-Afro-Latinx Hispanics living in the United States (U.S.) who identify as Indigenous or mixed race (mestiza/o or mulatta/o) (Parker et al., 2015), this erasure renders anti-mestiza/o racism invisible to family scholars and reproduces White supremacy.

What does *looking Mexican* mean? Is this tacit knowledge — accessible to a 9-year-old — understood by family scientists who study Mexican-origin families? Ignorance about Mexican-origin people's mixed-race heritage and of the plurality of Mexican Americans who identify as mestizas/os (Indigenous and European admixture) reflects the historical racialization of Mexicans as a newly constructed Other by 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglo settler-colonists (Gómez, 2018). While mestiza/o identity is held by people of diverse Latin American nationalities, it is imperative that family scholars understand how racial mestizaje operates in Mexican-origin communities (Gastelum et al., 2021), the largest U.S. Latinx subgroup (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2019). Given the steady publication of research about Mexican families, reducing Mexicanness to an ethnicity distinct from race constitutes epistemic injustice and systematically excludes Mexican-origin families from a shared understanding of what race "is." While the idea of mestizaje is not unproblematic, *critical* mestizaje (Pérez-Torres, 2006) moves beyond biological admixture to examine how mestizas/os negotiate mixed race identities at multiple locations—embodied and ideological. The inclusion of the body as a site of colonization, hybridity, and ahistoricized deindigenization brings into focus the importance of problematizing racial ambiguity among Mexican Americans. What follows is a brief tracing of the historical origin of racial indigeneity/mestizaje, the consequences of its erasure, and implications for family research, policy, and practice.

### **Historical origins of e(race)ing Mexican Americans**

Mexican-origin people are descended from the original inhabitants of North America (Gómez, 2018), although the proportion of Indigenous genetic admixture is greater in those who identify as Mexican or Latino/Chicano than in those who identify as Spanish (Klimentidis et al., 2009). Hernan Cortés's 1519 invasion of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán launched genocide, displacement, and enslavement upon Indigenous peoples residing in what is now Mexico (Reséndez, 2016). To bolster precarious claims to land, the Spanish Crown sanctioned miscegenation between Indigenous women and White colonists, resulting in a new racial identity, the *mestiza/o* (Vinson, 2018). Immediately, *mestizo/a* became a marker of racial impurity, complicated by the subsequent miscegenation between *mestizos/as*, Whites, Indians, Black Africans, Chinese, and Filipinos in New Spain (Reséndez, 2016). Attempts to monitor racial impurity resulted in a caste system that upheld White (Spanish) superiority with non-Whites situated along an ever-shifting hierarchy. Three centuries later, an independent Mexico faced a new White supremacist threat from the North, as Anglo-Americans expanded violence westward under the racist doctrine of Manifest Destiny (Gómez, 2018). Unlike Spanish Whites, Anglo Whites did not share a deep history of colonial White-Indigenous miscegenation due to a relatively low Indigenous-European ratio in the early British colonies (Jordan, 2014) and the creation of a mail-order (White) bride market launched by the Virginia Company, Jamestown's British corporate financier (Zug, 2016). The acquisition of northern Mexican territories in 1848 created a Mexican "problem" for the Anglo colonizers who used Mexicans' multiraciality to further distance Anglo Whites from Blacks and Native Americans and to foment discord among all non-White groups (Gómez, 2018).

In 1930, when "No Mexicans, No Dogs" signs abounded, persistent brown-White stratification was reflected in the addition of a Mexican race category to the decennial census (Cohn, 2010). Decades later, Chicano and Puerto Rican activists galvanized toward collective resistance for groups with a shared history of Spanish colonization. Despite having distinct racial, cultural, and political histories, movement leaders recognized that increased statistical power could result in greater government resources, leading to the pan-ethnic Hispanic category introduced in the 1980 Census (Mora, 2014). However, Hispanic-as-ethnicity forced *mestiza/o* Mexicans to choose among arbitrarily predetermined racial categories (e.g., White, Black) (Gibson & Jung, 2002) and weakened the argument for civil rights and affirmative action due to tenuous terminology on which to base racial discrimination for research and legal purposes (Hayes-Bautista, 1980).

### **Consequences of denying Indigenous ancestry**

Mexican Americans' lived experiences as people of Indigenous descent who are *raced but not of a race* shape the well-being of entire communities. Forcing non-Black Mexican Americans to "choose White" makes it acceptable to ignore race in research on violence against Mexican origin people (Rodriguez, 2018), a circumstance with implications for scholarship, practice, and policy concerning issues such as police brutality, femicide, ethnic-racial socialization, and the effects of colorism within families. Mexican Americans' multiracial ancestral subjectivity is invalidated with alarming frequency in the course of "doing" family whereby everyday tasks such as registering for a vaccine or applying for a driver's license reveals a precarious racial existence via false choices that exclude Indigenous ancestry for Mexican Americans who have no tribal affiliation with American Indians or Alaska Natives. Seemingly benign microaggressions such as "What *are* you?" or "Just check White" contribute to the accumulation

of toxic stress while placing the burden on Mexican Americans to defend their racial existence, a source of gaslighting with psychological and epistemic implications. Conversely, the expectation that Mexican Americans either quietly accept racially invalidating comments or explain their problematic nature maintains the “doing” of Black and brown people “educating White folks,” (Sue et al., 2009, p. 1104), a practice that perpetuates White supremacy by absolving microaggressors from the harm they produce. Moreover, labeling mestiza/o-identified Mexican Americans as White is incongruent with their social positioning as racially inferior to Anglo Whites. This incongruence is understudied yet has implications for individual well-being (e.g., acculturative stress) and within-group differences (e.g., colorism) and is associated with anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity within the Mexican community (Adames et al., 2016).

The erasure of Indigeneity and problematizing race within a Black-White binary has deadly implications for Mexican Americans. While the number of Latinx people killed by police is second only to African Americans, police brutality against brown people receives little coverage and has not generated a collective community response akin to Black Lives Matter (Downs, 2016). Because police departments use government forms to classify race, Mexican American victims of lethal force may be misidentified as White only, resulting in an immeasurable undercount (Rodriguez, 2018). Similarly, Mexican American’s racial invisibility contributes to a broader reticence to examine violence against brown women from an intersectional lens. In 2020, the disappearance of Vanessa Guillén, a Mexican American Army soldier stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, led to demands that the U.S. Army account for its culture of sexual violence against women. After Guillén’s remains were discovered and her alleged killer committed suicide, media coverage took a race-neutral gendered approach, with U.S. Representative Sylvia García framing the momentum as a “military ‘me too’ movement” (Coronado, 2020). While the congressional action that has resulted from this tragedy (i.e., I am Vanessa Guillén Act, 2020) represents progress against military sexual violence, the colorblind discourse reinforced the public’s perceived lack of historical context (Downs, 2016) from which to interrogate Mexican American femicide at the intersection of gender and race, an orientation with methodological and clinical implications.

### **Implications for family scientists and practitioners**

Family scientists and practitioners should be aware that 37% of Mexican Americans reject the racial categories imposed by the U.S. Census, choosing instead “some other race” (Humes et al., 2011 as cited in Parker et al., 2015). Examining whether millions of Mexican Americans have rejected the a priori categories because they identify with their mixed Indigenous ancestry would illuminate how race shifts across geopolitical contexts. Working with scholars who view race as a process rather than as a category, Family Science departments can disrupt White supremacy by conducting curricular reviews that help uncover how race is taught in coursework about Mexican Americans and whether the erasure of Indigeneity and African ancestry contributes to a fundamental misunderstanding of the experiences of Mexican American families and communities. Conversations at the national level can challenge dominant assumptions underlying race logics. For example, journal editors and reviewers may benefit from professional development that teaches Mexican American’s racialized history and its implications for the validity of race-related measures (e.g., ethnic racial socialization instruments) that neither operationalize race nor account for multiraciality/mestizaje among Mexican Americans. Moreover, critical mestizaje (CM) (Pérez Torres, 2006) provides a framework for understanding

Mexican Americans' racial subjectivity as an embodied simultaneous presence-absence of Indigeneity that transcends place and time, but with ahistoricized ties to ideologies that also erase Blackness, despite the well-documented admixture between Indigenous, Whites, and Africans during colonization. CM provides conceptual tools for naming Indigenous erasure while reckoning with Mexican Americans' unearned privilege as White-adjacents. Importantly, CM can inform antiracist interventions that incorporate historical accounts of cross-continental colonization to enhance Mexican Americans' awareness of their deep ancestral connections to the North American continent, a sharp repudiation of the deficit narrative of Mexican-as-perpetual-invader (Finley & Esposito, 2020).

In conclusion, erasing Mexican Americans' Indigenous ancestry in research, practice, curricula, and interventions aimed at improving the lives of the largest Latinx subgroup in the U.S. perpetuates White supremacy. Reducing Mexican Americans to an ethnicity invalidates the embodied knowledge accumulated from centuries of resistance to double colonization and renders urgent issues such as police violence and anti-mestiza/o racism invisible to family researchers. Critical mestizaje allows us to reimagine a radical praxis necessary for sustainable critical, antiracist theories, methods, and practices in Family Science.

### Selected References

- Garza, S. D. (2014). Decolonizing intimacies: Women of Mexican descent and colorism. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 39(2), 35-63.
- Gastelum, C. D., Caporale, J., & Rodriguez, R. (2021). "Smiling brown" in the face of colorism: Examining testimonios among the Latina/o community. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 46(1), 53-82
- Gómez, L. (2018). *Manifest destinies: The making of the Mexican American race*. (2nd ed.) New York University Press.
- Pérez-Torres, R. (2006). *Mestizaje: Critical uses of race in Chicano culture*. University of Minnesota Press.

### References

- Adames, H. Y., Chavez-Dueñas, N. Y., & Organista, K. C. (2016). Skin color matters in Latino/a communities: Identifying, understanding, and addressing Mestizaje racial ideologies in clinical practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 47(1), 46. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/pro0000062>
- Cohn, D. (2010). *Census history: Counting Hispanics*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2010/03/03/census-history-counting-hispanics-2/>
- Coronado, A. (2020, October 7). 'The military's #MeToo moment:' Fort Hood victims speak out. *Associated Press News*.
- Downs, K. (2016, July 14). Why aren't more people talking about Latinos killed by police? *PBS News Hour*.
- Finley, L., & Esposito, L. (2020). The immigrant as bogeyman: Examining Donald Trump and the right's anti-immigrant, anti-PC rhetoric. *Humanity & Society*, 44(2), 178-197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160597619832627>

- García, M. (Host). (2021). *Anything for Selena* [Audio podcast]. *Latino U.S.A.*  
<https://www.latinousa.org/anythingforselena/>
- Garza, S. D. (2014). Decolonizing intimacies: Women of Mexican descent and colorism. *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 39(2), 35-63.
- Gastelum, C. D., Caporale, J., & Rodriguez, R. (2021). "Smiling brown" in the face of colorism: Examining testimonios among the Latina/o community. *Aztlan: A Journal of Chicano Studies*, 46(1), 53-82.
- Gibson, C., & Jung, K. (2002). *Historical census statistics on population totals by race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic origin, 1790 to 1990, for the United States, regions, divisions, and states*. US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/pop-twps0056102020.pdf>
- Gómez, L. (2018). *Manifest destinies: The making of the Mexican American race*. (2nd ed.) New York University Press.
- Hayes-Bautista, D. E. (1980). Identifying "hispanic" populations: the influence of research methodology upon public policy. *American Journal of Public Health*, 70(4), 353.  
<https://doi.org/10.2105/ajp>
- I am Vanessa Guillén Act of 2020, H.R.8270, 116th Congress (2019-2020).  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/8270/text?r=1&s=1>
- Jordan, W. D. (2014). Historical origins of the one-drop racial rule in the United States. *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, 1(1). <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/91g761b>
- Klimentidis, Y. C., Miller, G. F., & Shriver, M. D. (2009). Genetic admixture, self-reported ethnicity, self-estimated admixture, and skin pigmentation among Hispanics and Native Americans. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 138(4), 375-383.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajpa.20945>
- Mora, G. C. (2014). *Making Hispanics: How activists, bureaucrats, and media constructed a new American*. University of Chicago Press.
- Noe-Bustamante, L., Flores A., & Shah, S. (2019). *Facts on Hispanics of Mexican origin in the United States, 2017*. Pew Research Center.  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/u-s-hispanics-facts-on-mexican-origin-latinos/>
- Parker, K., Horowitz, J.M., Morin, R., & Lopez, M.H. (2015). *Multiracial in America: Proud, diverse and growing in numbers*. Pew Research Center. [https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/06/2015-06-11\\_multiracial-in-america\\_final-updated.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/06/2015-06-11_multiracial-in-america_final-updated.pdf)
- Pérez-Torres, R. (2006). *Mestizaje: Critical uses of race in Chicano culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Reséndez, A. (2016). *The other slavery: the uncovered story of Indian enslavement in America*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Rodriguez, R. (2018). Fighting law enforcement brutality while living with trauma in a world of impunity. *Genealogy*, 2(4), 56. doi:10.3390/genealogy2040056
- Sosa-Provencio, M. A. (2019). A Revolucionista ethic of care: Four Mexicana educators' subterranean social justice revolution of fighting and feeding. *American Educational Research Journal*, 56(4), 1113-1147. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218814168>
- Sue, D. W., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., Rivera, D. P., & Lin, A. I. (2009). How White faculty perceive and react to difficult dialogues on race: *Implications for education and training*. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 37(8), 1090-1115. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0011000009340443>

- Vinson III, B. (2017). *Before mestizaje: The frontiers of race and caste in colonial Mexico* (Vol. 105). Cambridge University Press.
- Zug, M. A. (2016). *Buying a bride: An engaging history of mail-order matches*. New York University Press.